AMERICAN SURFACES

STEPHEN SHORE

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INTRODUCTION
BOB NICKAS

Who took these pictures? The drifter in the bathroom of the bus station in Oklahoma City; one of the hippie boys watching the sun go down at the Grand Canyon; a tourist visiting Cape Kennedy for the launch of the Skylab space station? From one desolate motel bed to another, from one unmemorable meal to the next, from town to town, east to west, they can clearly be seen as a visual diary recounting the path of someone passing through the world, recording nearly everything he sees and does, and almost everyone he meets along the way. Together, the pictures form a portrait, and even though we never actually see the man behind the camera, he's there, present and anonymous. He could be almost anyone. But these pictures weren't shot at random by someone on vacation or simply adrift; we know they were made by Stephen Shore. Back home, as if he had simply been away on summer vacation, the film was left at a local camera store and sent to Kodak for processing; a few days later the prints were ready.

When these pictures were first shown in New York in 1972 they must have looked like snapshots, but their unaffected, natural appearance was entirely intentional. (Today in fact, it's almost impossible to mistake Shore's pictures in this period for those of anyone else.) The prints were small, glossy, and were hung directly on the wall with backing tape in a grid that covered three walls. Although at the time, according to the artist, the work was not well received, we have come to see how Shore's project signalled a major shift in art photography — which in the early 1970s still meant black-and-white, formally composed and framed. Over thirty years have passed, and *American Surfaces* serves as a major landmark.

Shore, along with William Eggleston, helped to define the American vernacular in 1970s colour photography. He is an artist who built upon some of the best of those itinerant, restless photographers who came before him — from Walker Evans to Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand — and a pioneer who would exert considerable influence on many who followed in the 1980s and 1990s. These pictures may appear dated — by hair and dress, the parked cars, window displays and signage, the decoration of private homes — yet they have an undeniable immediacy and presence. Through them we are able to assemble another portrait, that of a particular time in America as seen through the eyes of an artist who let his camera tell the story.

In 1972, Nixon was president, and the war in Vietnam raged on. There were anti-war protests, planes being hijacked, and bombs set off in Northern Ireland. The Olympics were held in Munich, where Palestinian terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes. There were oil shortages and long lines at gas stations, and Apollo 16 had gone to the Moon. The bigger picture can always be more easily recalled. But it's often the smaller, seemingly insignificant moments and details that help us to connect the past and the present, and it's through the shared recognition of lived experience that we come to make sense of who we are.

When Stephen Shore decided to embark on an extended cross-country trip — his first — with a 35 mm Rollei (the forerunner of the point-and-shoot camera) by his side, he was twenty-four years old, born and raised in New York City. The pictures began in March of 1972, in and around the city; by June he was on the road, driving south to Maryland, Virginia, and the

Carolinas, and into the deep South and Southwest. In Flagstaff, Arizona he turned east towards Oklahoma City, following Route 66, then north to Chicago. He admits to being 'inspired by Bobby Troup's song, "Route 66"' ('Get your kicks/on Route 66'). As Shore passed tidy rows of houses in Durango, Colorado, walked the sleepy streets of downtown Farmington, New Mexico, and opened the door to an empty, filthy refrigerator in Pontiac, Michigan, he was experiencing a world beyond the one he had always known. People looked and sounded different. Time moved more slowly, and even seemed to stand still — something he shows us, remarkably, again and again. The texture of each place was visible. Traces of the past could be seen and felt.

American Surfaces is a road movie, and in that tradition it has at times a downbeat mood, its director/protagonist often drawn to the bleak and the mundane. Frequently, nothing seems to be happening, or something wholly unremarkable has been recorded. Yet there is tremendous beauty found where it's least expected, as well as humour and pathos. This book becomes a meditation on what it means to be in the world, on what it means to point a camera in one direction rather than another, and no matter what is being recorded, its subject is always photography itself. Like any road movie, there is a potentially endless cast of characters. The man behind the counter in the pawn shop in Farmington, who may well have stood there every day for the previous forty years (page 63). The boys at the gas station in Selma, Alabama (page 38): one younger, white and blond, looking directly towards the camera; the other, older and black, eyes cast down. The drifter in the bus

station in Oklahoma City (page 112, quite possibly one of the most moving portraits in all of 1970s colour photography). These are real people living their lives in a place and time that was already in a sense gone. Here then, is *American Surfaces*' larger sociological subject. The urban and commercial sprawl of the mid-to-late 1970s/early 1980s would threaten to envelop America in a dulling sameness, depriving much of the country of its distinct character and its people of their sense of place. This is, in part, what Shore hoped to, and did, capture. Looking back to a point in time from which we are far removed, particularly to the South and Southwest that we see here, 1972 was already lost to itself: its past neatly framed in a picture on the wall of the Holiday Inn in Durango, Colorado (page 68).

For all the miles logged by Shore in the making of *American Surfaces*, there are no postcard-perfect images of the landscape; not once in 300-plus pictures is there a scene which would easily lend itself to the commercial idealization of the open road. Shore, for the most part, got up close. There are many interiors, many portraits. He lets us see where he was. When he stopped along U.S. 89 in Arizona to make a picture of the Painted Desert (page 72), he included the guardrail at the bottom of the frame. At the Grand Canyon, it's not the epic grandeur that interests him, but the people who are there (page 77). The human element is at the centre of his project. The question 'What should I photograph?' was of little concern. Shore's answer: 'Everything, everyone'. In an interview with Lynne Tillman in 2004, he said, quite simply, 'I was recording my life.'

'It was a visual journal of a trip across the country. When I started

the trip I had many ideas about what I was going to do. I didn't want to do "Decisive Moments". Cartier-Bresson had used the term for a particular kind of visual coming together but I was interested more in the ordinary, of things not happening in your life. I wanted to be visually aware as I went through the day. I started photographing everyone I met, every meal, every toilet, every bed I slept in, the streets I walked on, the towns I visited. Then, when the trip was over, I just continued it.'

The concentration Shore brought to bear on his surroundings, from day to day over a protracted period of time, evidences what can best be described as heightened awareness. This intention to photograph everything he did and everyone he met may have its roots in his early experience taking pictures around Andy Warhol's New York studio, the Factory, between 1965 and 1967, when Shore was in his late teens. Warhol's influence, in particular, and Pop's in general — seriality and repetition, matter-of-factness, flatness, pop culture and an attention to signage — have often been discussed in relation to Shore's early 1970s work. There is, however, a less remarked upon influence where Warhol is concerned: his constant recording, by means of camera and tape recorder, of everything and everyone around him. Warhol's camera of choice, the Polaroid, generated pictures in the moment in which they were made. Pop's influence is most clearly apparent in the signage that Shore picks up on, or to which he directs our attention. On a street in Queens in April 1972, two men who are on the sidewalk, turned away from the camera and anchored in place, don't appear to be moving. Part of a sign in the top left corner of the picture is visible: STAND (page 21).

In West Palm Beach, Shore took a picture of the School of Charm and Modeling (page 212); in Macon, Georgia a picture of Strange Drugs (page 33). If you ever visit any of these cities you might want to see if these signs are still there. Shore's sense of humour is perhaps most resonant when his eye locks onto a particular surface in a particular place, as he does with a close-up of a green formica tabletop in Granite, Texas (page 107). Time and again the cool detachment of Warhol's sensibility is evident, yet always filtered through Shore's open, inquisitive eye, tempered by his sense of humour and willingness to connect with the people around him.

The everything/everyone impulse is also related to the conceptual use of photography in the late 1960s/early 1970s, and to conceptual art. There is the deadpan humour of Ed Ruscha to consider — 'Every Building on the Sunset Strip' — as well as the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler's near-preposterous 1971 declaration to photograph 'everyone alive', which proposes, in part: 'Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.' The artist On Kawara, best known for his 'date paintings' that record the date on which the painting was made, is well worth considering in relation to Shore in the early 1970s. In addition to making 'date paintings' continuously since 1966, for many years Kawara kept journals — 'I Met', 'I Read', 'I Went' — that refer to everyone he met, everything he read, and his route through the cities he visited, from day to day, by xeroxed map.

For years Kawara sent telegrams to friends in the art world which said simply: 'I AM STILL ALIVE'. The continual daily production of paintings can be seen as a form of meditation, and the artist sees them in terms of what he calls 'pure consciousness'; Kawara's parallel activities call to mind Shore's admission: 'I was recording my life.'

Warhol once famously declared in an interview in 1967: 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it.' Look behind the surface of these pictures of Stephen Shore's. Everything's behind it: America, who we were, what we looked like, and the artist himself. Here also is the continuation and development of central paths in photographic and film history — street photography and the road movie — and a door opened onto many pictures by artists who would follow. The pictures in *American Surfaces*, taken over a twenty-two month period between 1972 and 1973, were not published in book form until 1999. That book, now out of print, comprises seventy-seven plates, none of which is identified by location or date, and there is no introductory essay or preface. Here, with 312 plates, identified by city, month and year, we are able to trace the artist's journey, to vicariously inhabit his everything/everyone mind, from beginning to end. With the publication of the definitive version of *American Surfaces*, what Stephen Shore would refer to as the 'director's cut', this book takes its place alongside Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959) and Garry Winogrand's *1964* (2002) as a major document for American photography in our time. It is nothing less than an event.

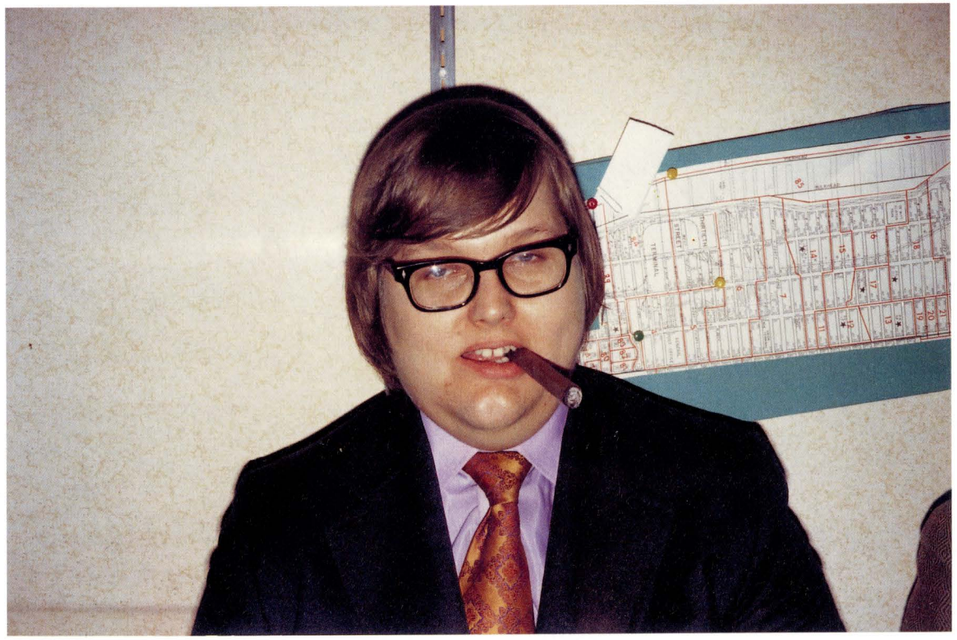
NEW YORK
MARCH 1972

New York City

New York City

Greenwich

Greenwich



New York City

New York City

Queens

Queens

Queens

Queens

Queens

Queens

Queens

New York City

MARYLAND
JUNE 1972

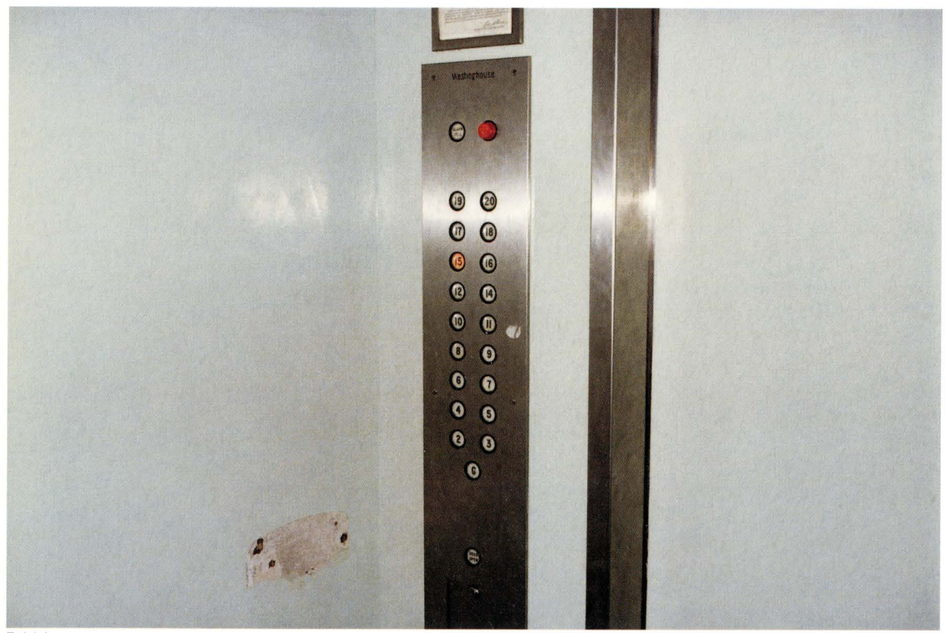
Baltimore

Fredericksburg

Fredericksburg

Richmond

NORTH CAROLINA
JUNE 1972



Raleigh

Raleigh

Raleigh

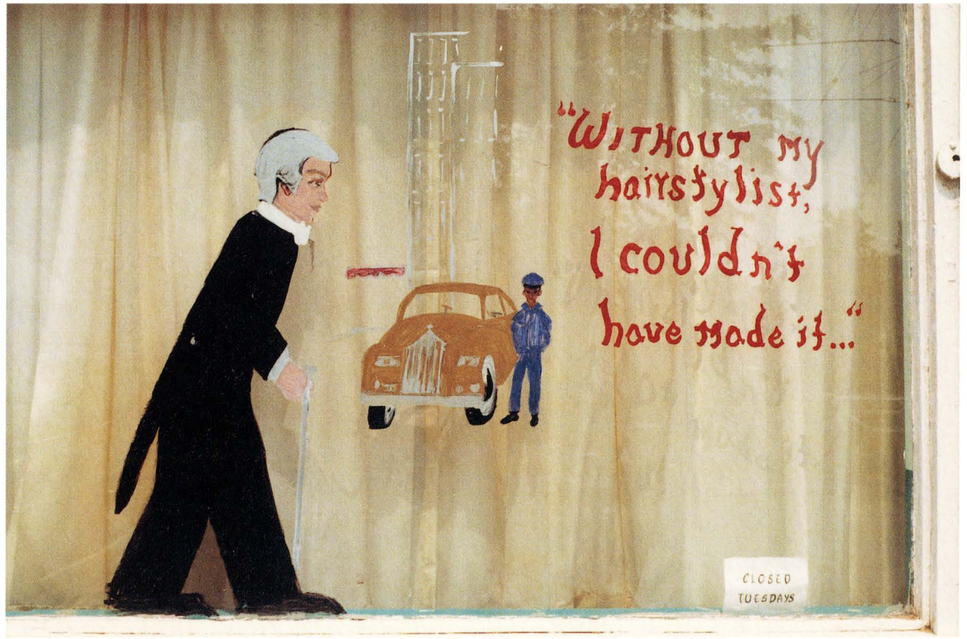
Raleigh

Raleigh

SOUTH CAROLINA
JUNE 1972

Columbia

Columbia



Columbia

GEORGIA
JUNE 1972

Aiken

Macon

Macon

Macon

Columbus

Montgomery

Montgomery

Selma

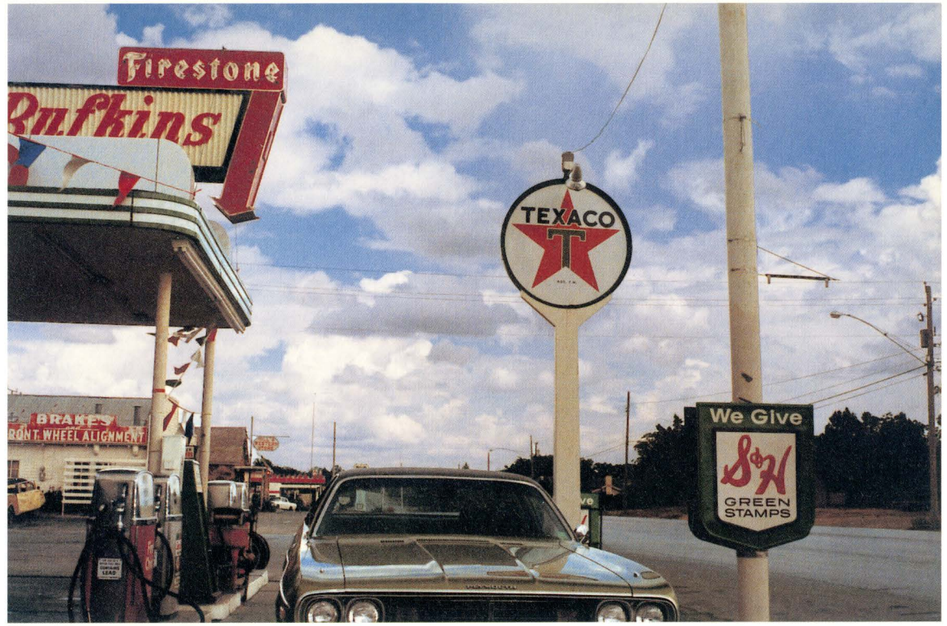
Meridian

Meridian

Marshall

Dallas

Dallas



Mineral Wells

Lubbock

Clovis

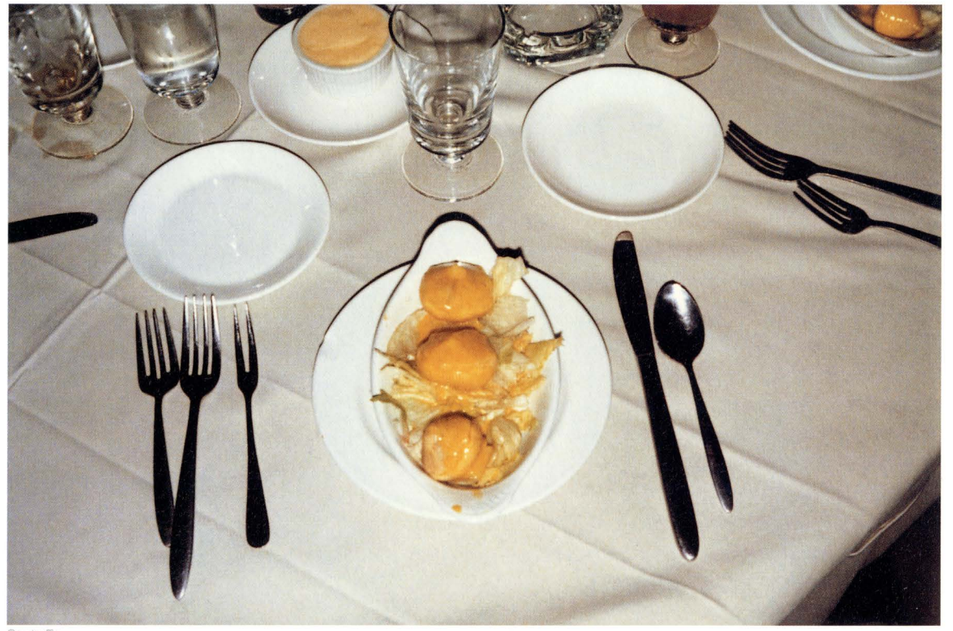
Clovis

Clovis

Clovis

Clovis

Santa Fe



Santa Fe

Santa Rosa

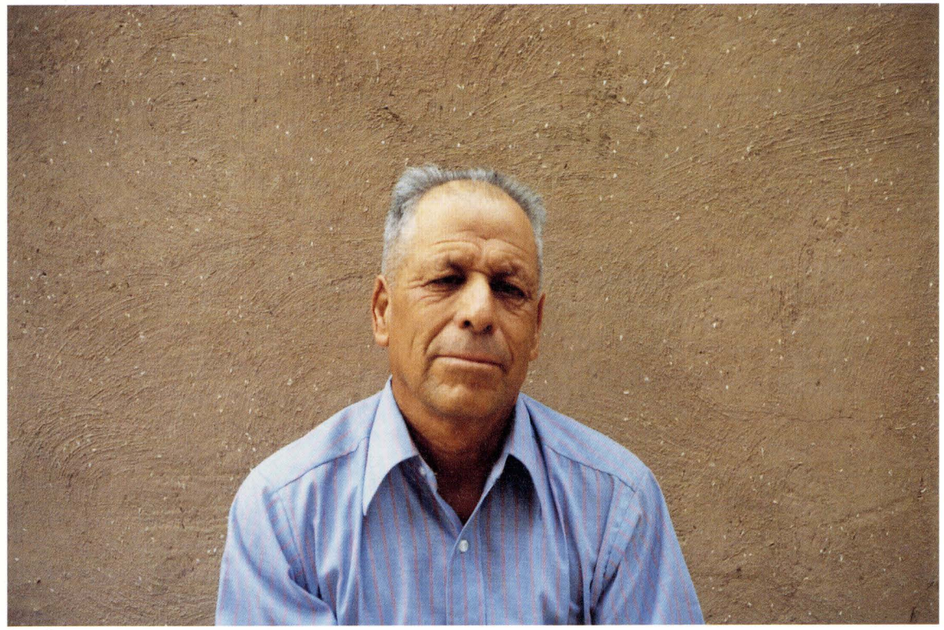
Santa Rosa

Albuquerque

Chimayo

Chimayo

Cerrillos



Santa Fe

Santa Fe

Santa Fe

Pueblo Bonito

Santa Fe

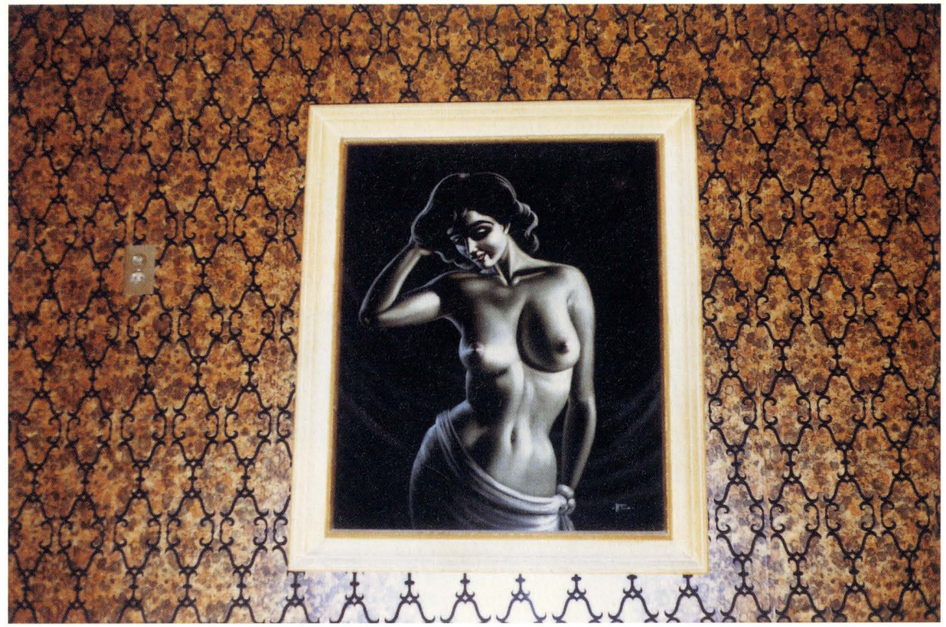
N.M. 44

Farmington

Farmington

Farmington

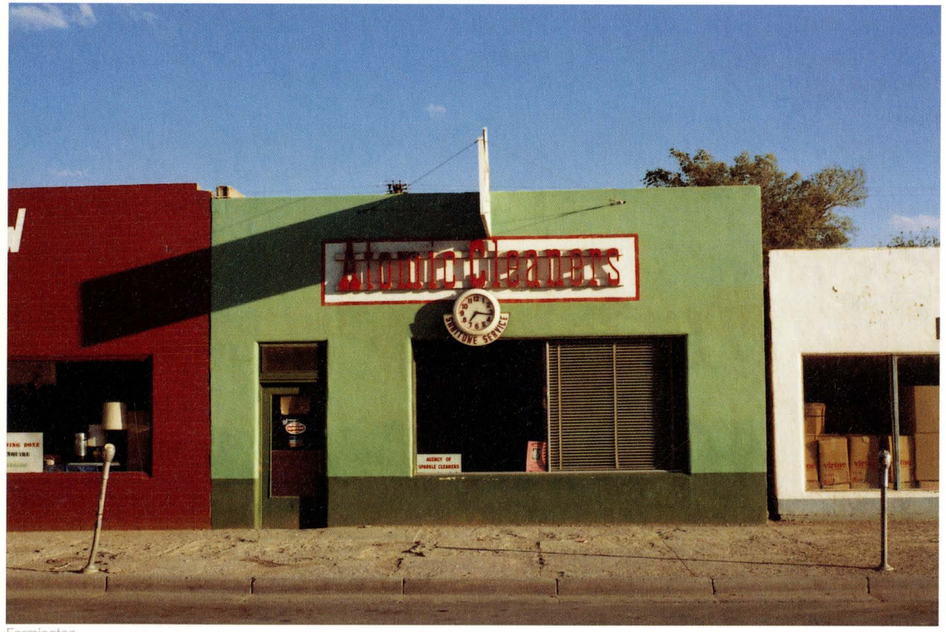
Farmington



Farmington

Farmington

Farmington



Farmington

Farmington

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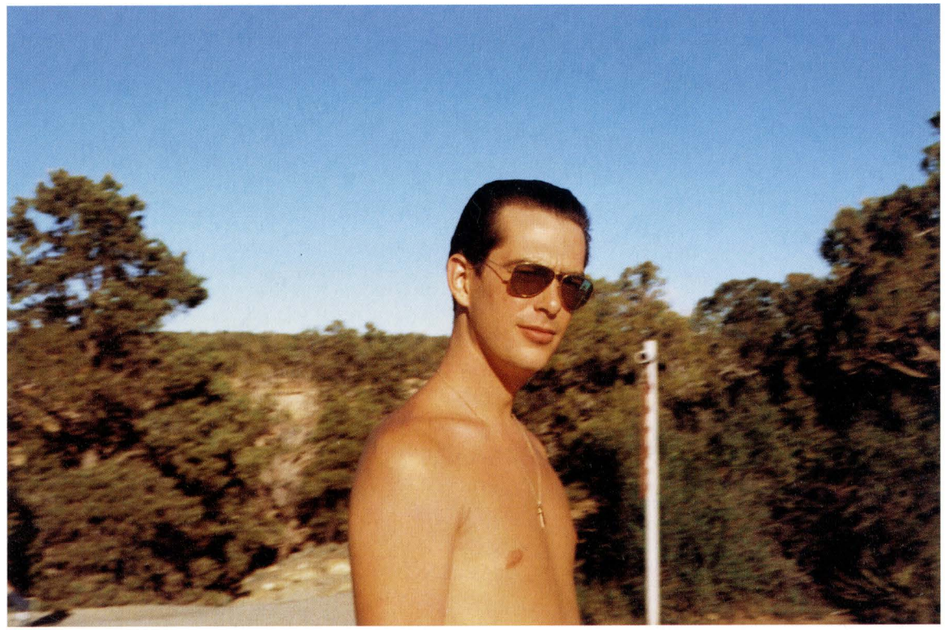
Farmington

Mesa Verde



Mesa Verde

Durango

Durango

Durango

Durango

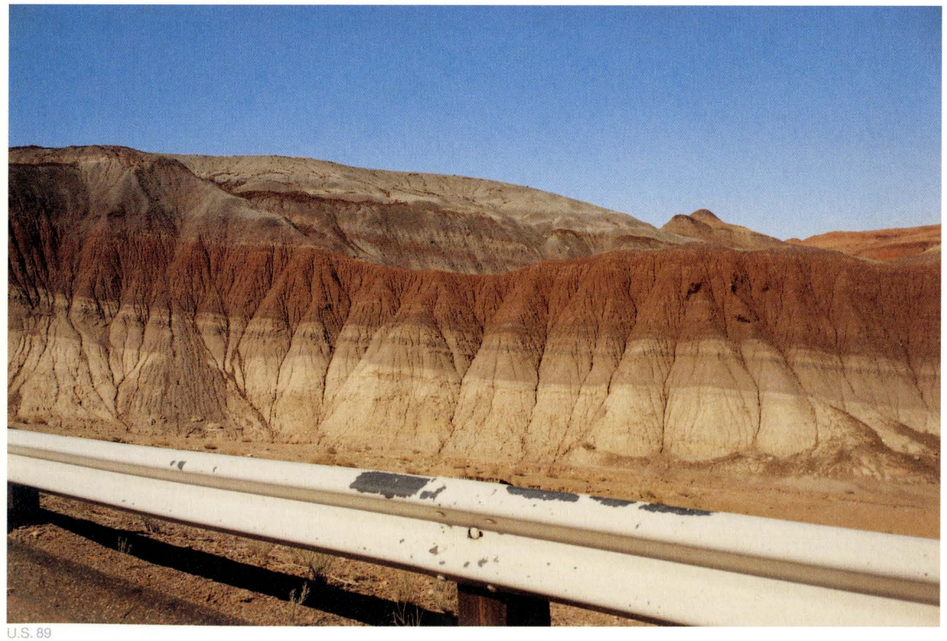
Durango

Durango

Durango

Durango

Durango



U.S. 89

Kanab

Kanab

Kanab

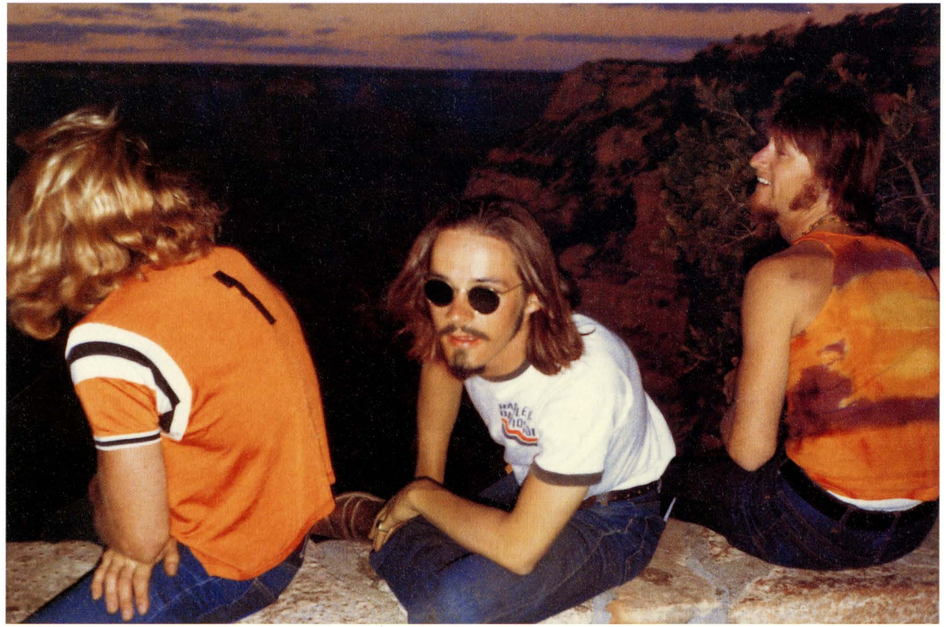
Kanab

Kanab

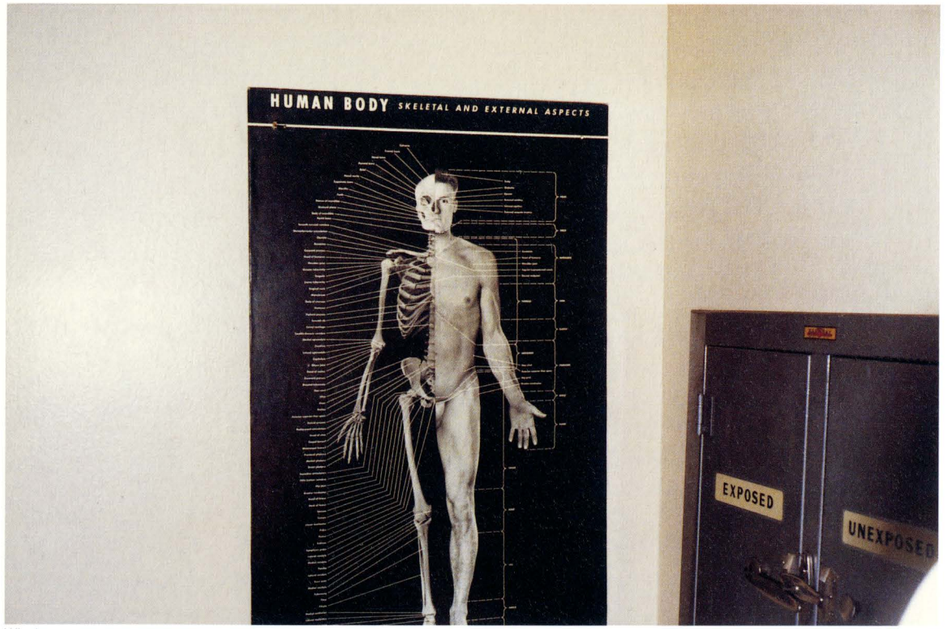
Lake Powell

Lake Powell

ARIZONA
JUNE 1972



Grand Canyon



Winslow

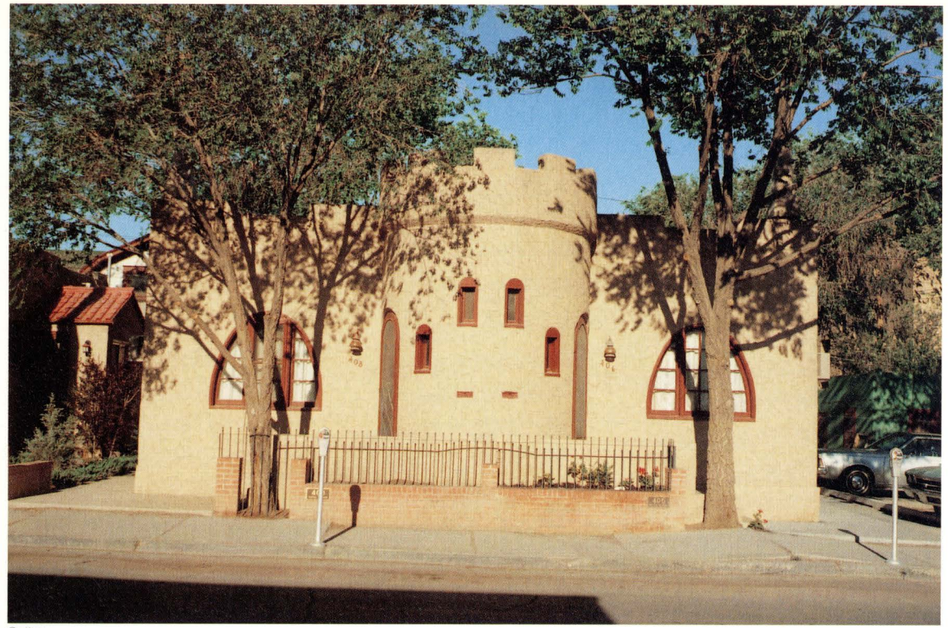
Holbrook

Holbrook

Holbrook

Holbrook

Gallup



Gallup

Gallup

Albuquerque

Tucumcari

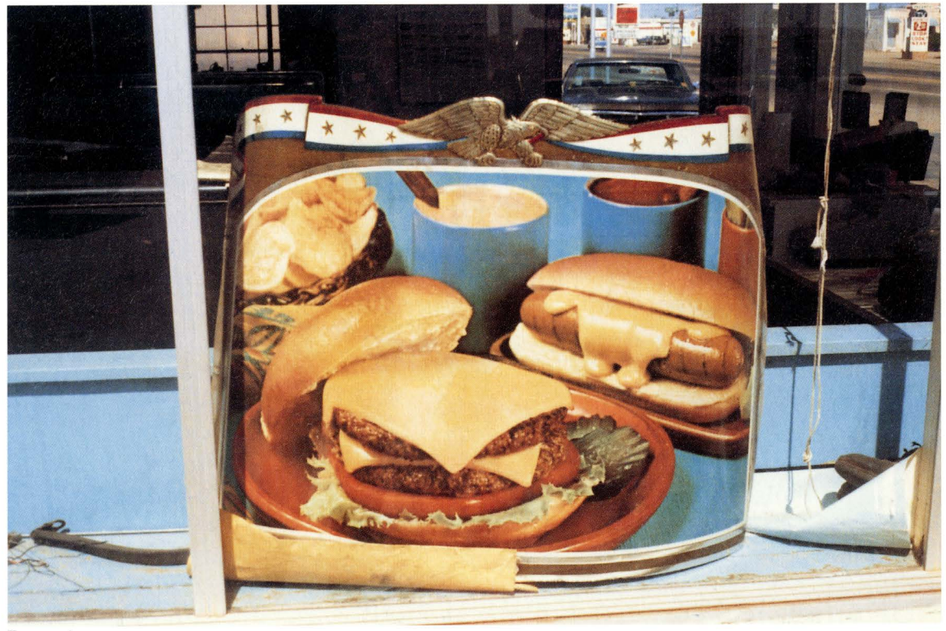
Tucumcari

Tucumcari

Tucumcari

Tucumcari

Tucumcari

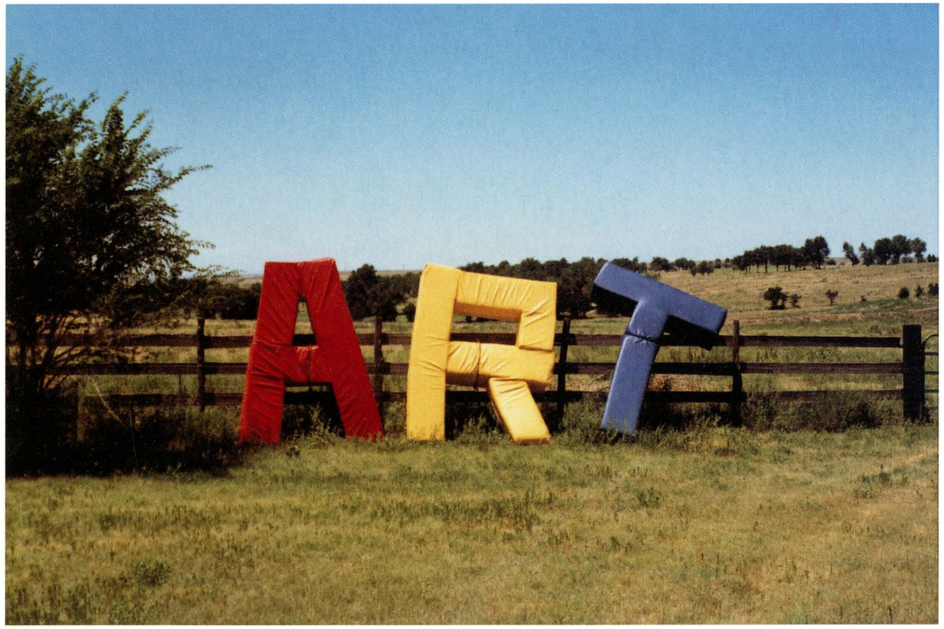


Tucumcari

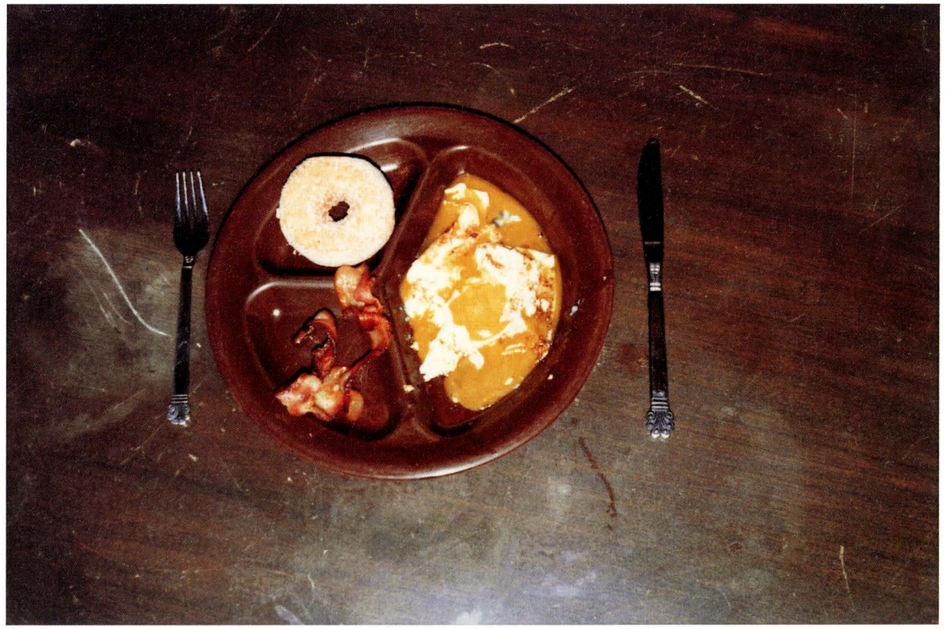
Tucumcari

Tucumcari

Tucumcari



Amarillo



Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Canyon

Canyon

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Alanreed

Alanreed

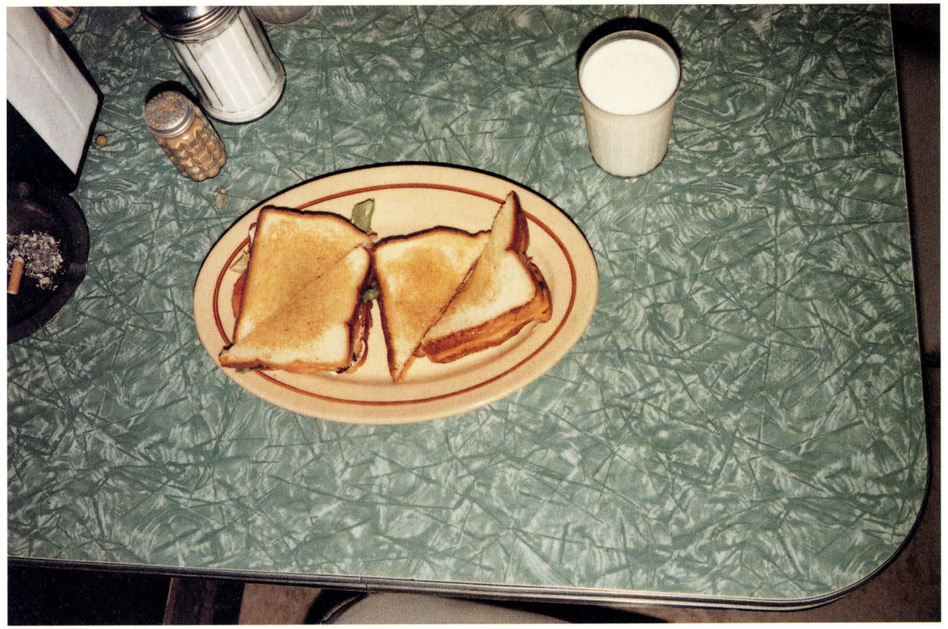
Shamrock

Shamrock

Granite

Granite

Granite



Granite

Granite

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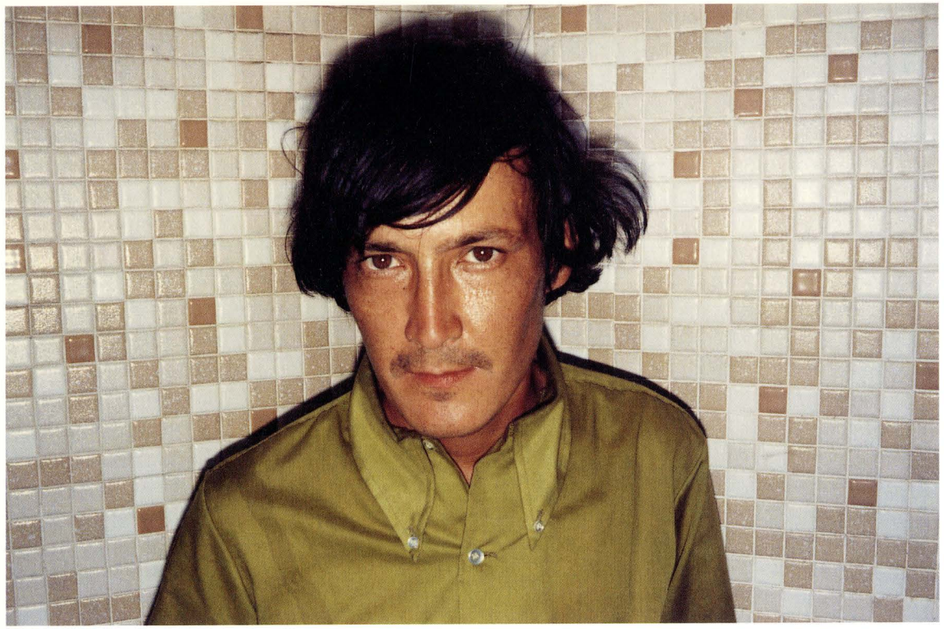
Granite

Granite

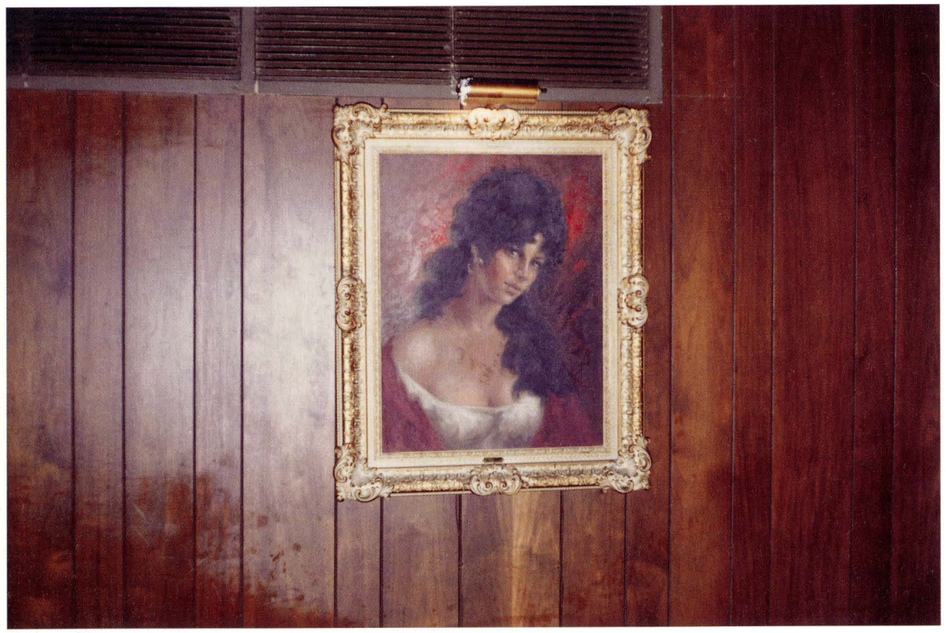
Clinton

Clinton

Clinton



Oklahoma City



Oklahoma City

Oklahoma City

Oklahoma City

Miami

Miami

Miami

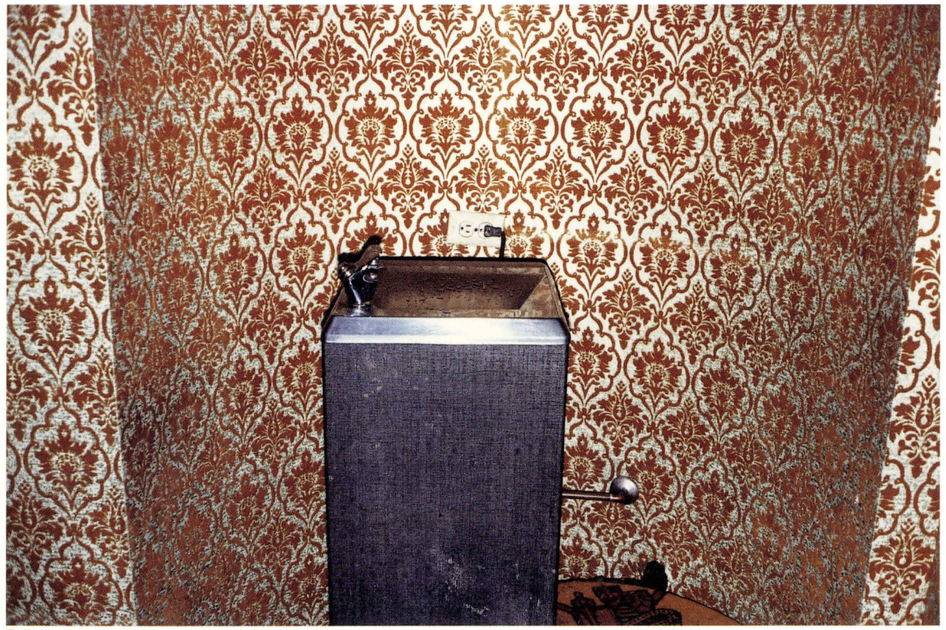
Miami

Miami

MISSOURI
JULY 1972

Springfield

Rolla

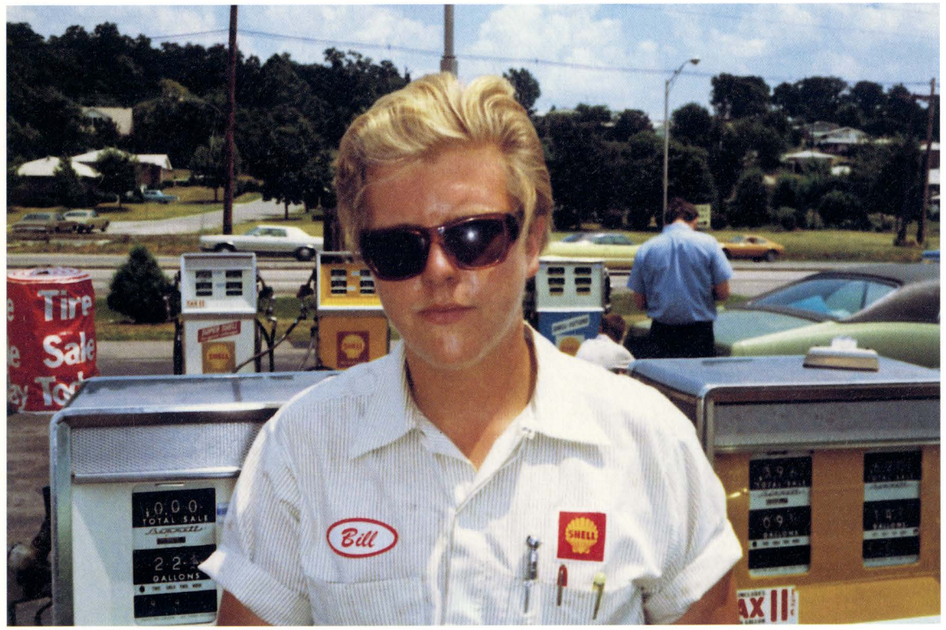


Rolla

St Louis

St Louis

St Louis



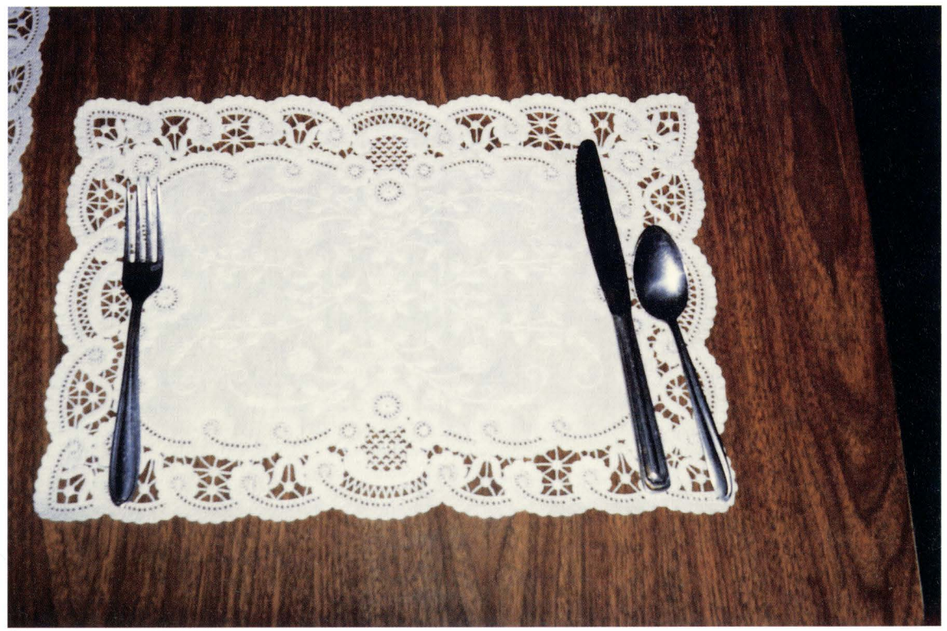
Springfield

Springfield

Normal

Chicago

Chicago



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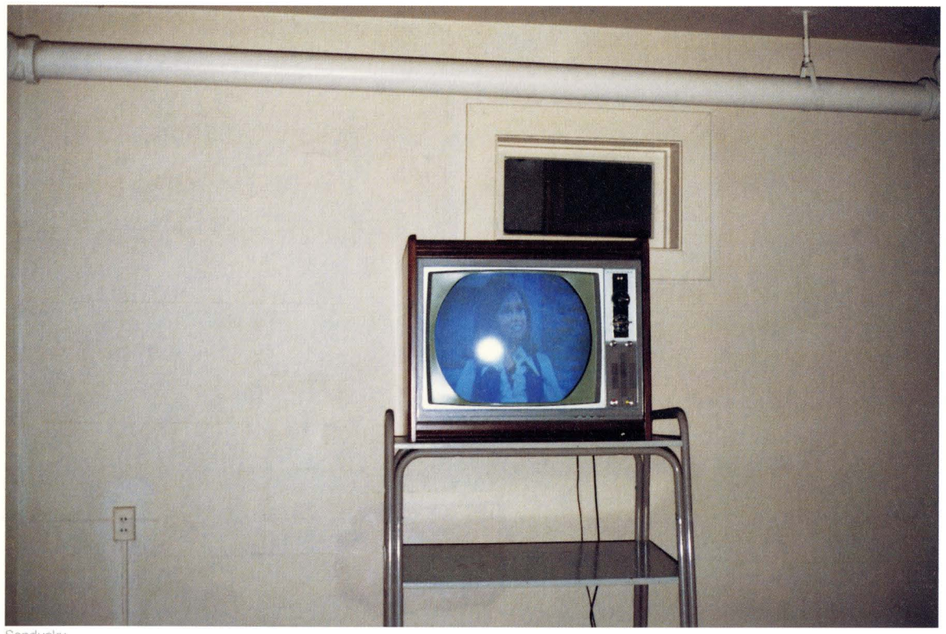


Sandusky

Sandusky

Toledo

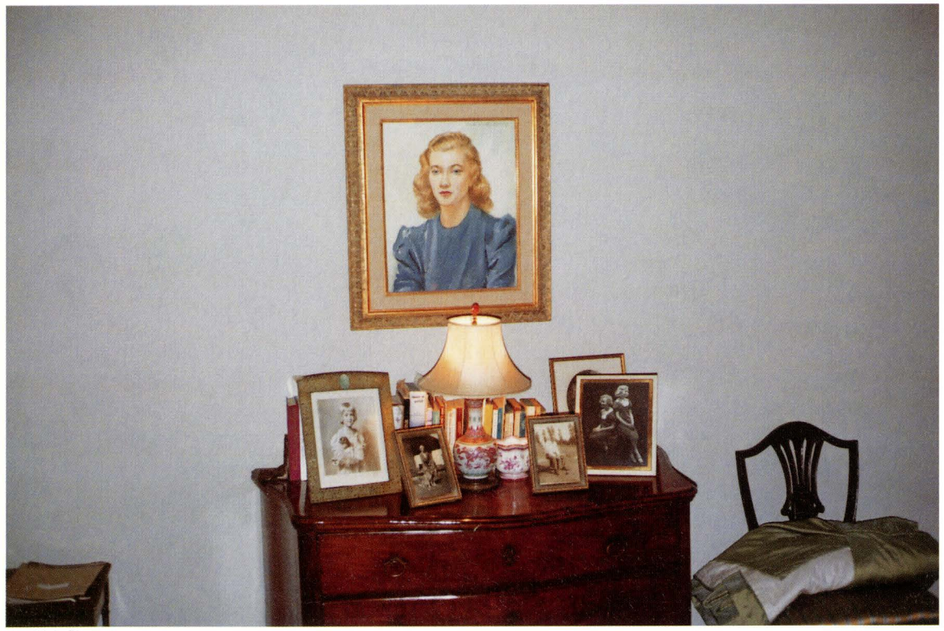
NEW YORK
JULY 1972

New York City

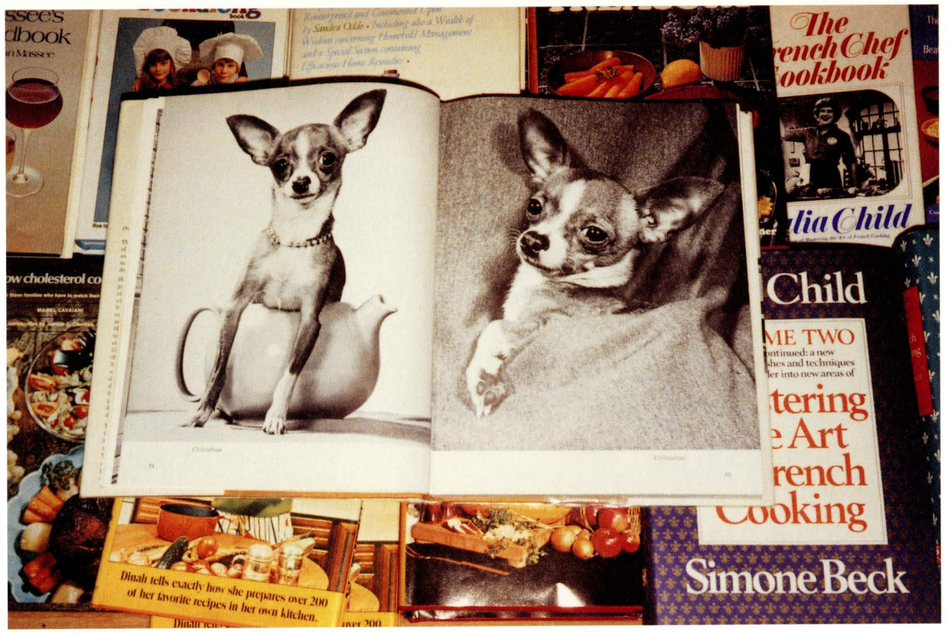
New York City

New York City

New York City

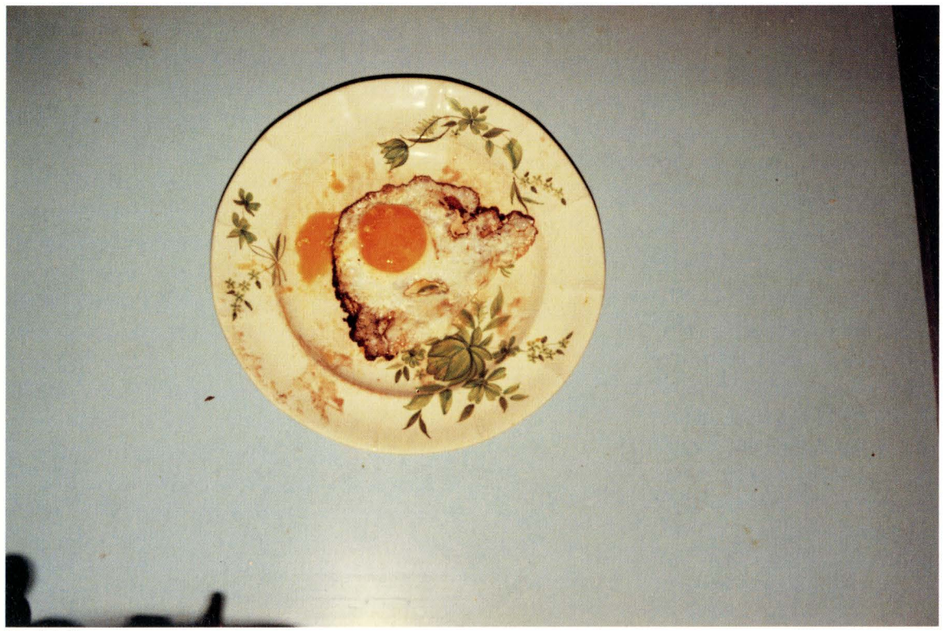


New York City

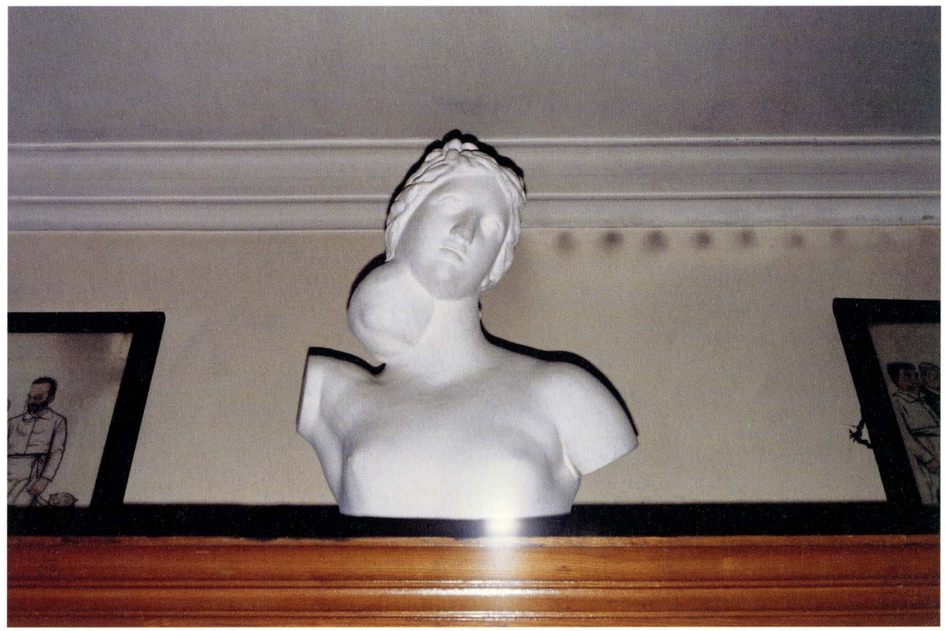


New York City

New York City



New York City



Philadelphia

NEW YORK
JULY 1972

New York City

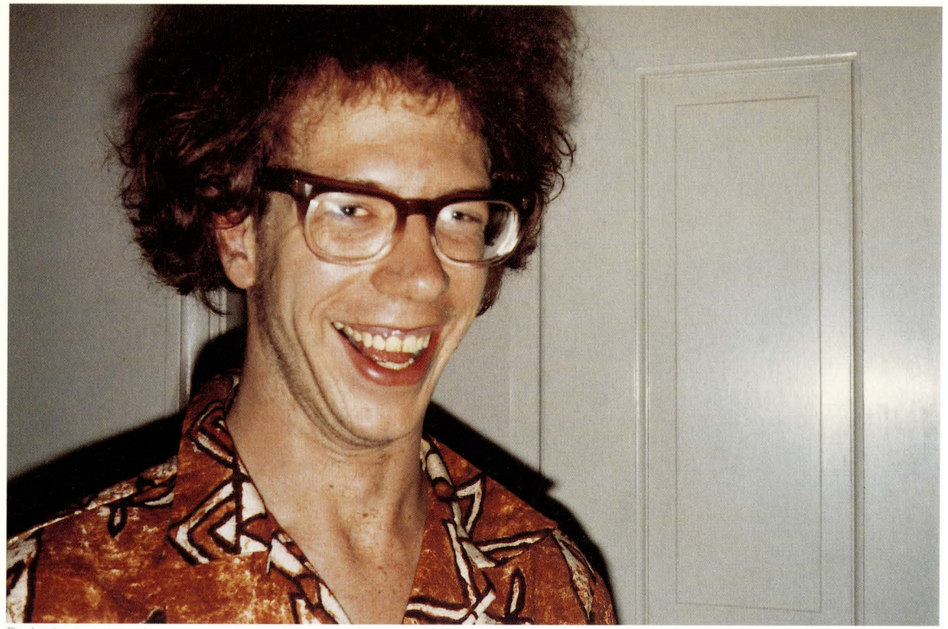
Sneden's Landing

New York City

Pontiac

Pontiac

Rochester



Rochester

Birmingham

Birmingham

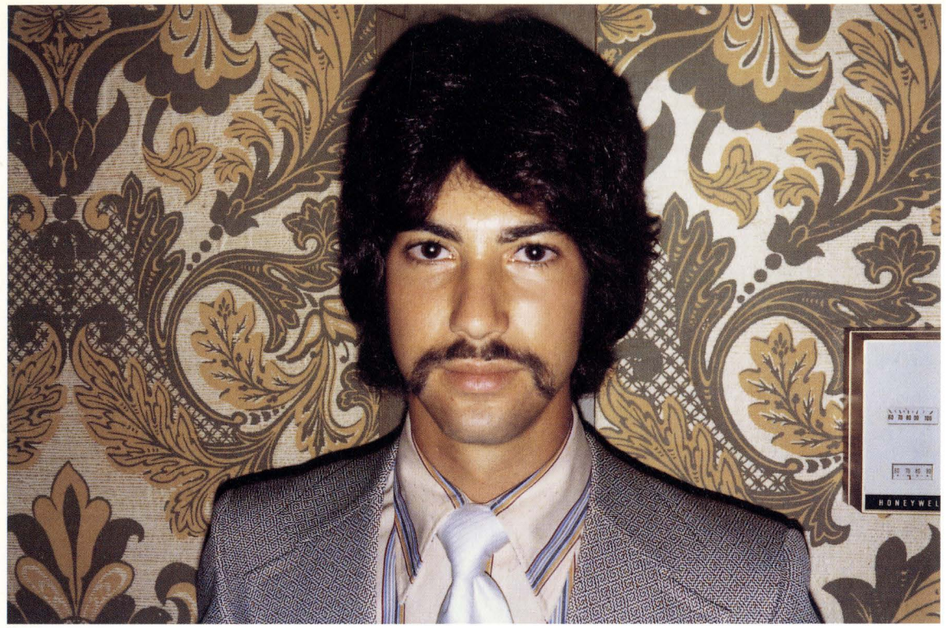
Washington

New York City

Staten Island

New York City

Flight to Dayton

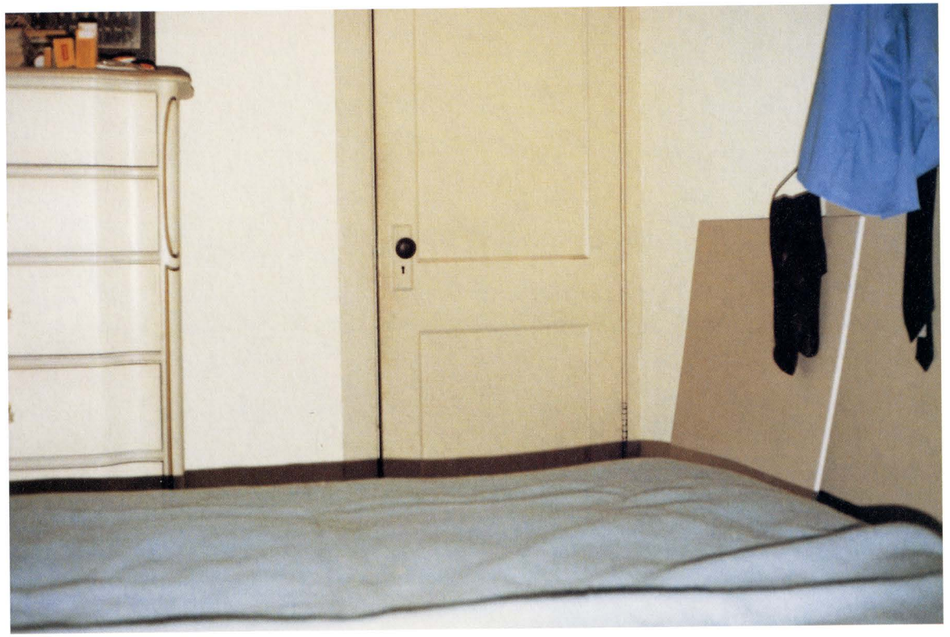


Dayton

Dayton

Dayton

Dayton



Dayton

Petersburg

Petersburg

Petersburg

Petersburg

Petersburg

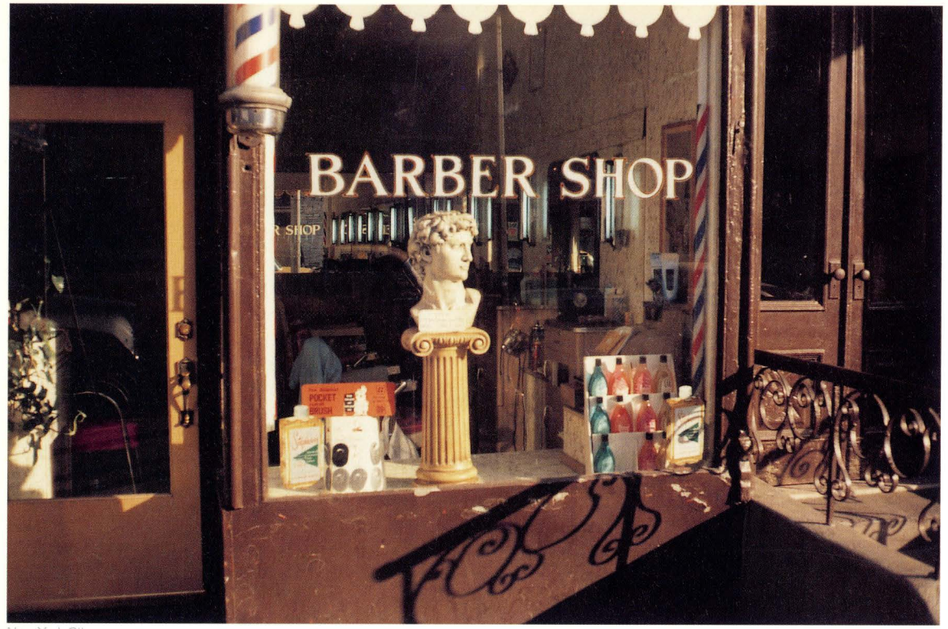
Westport

New York City

New York City

New York City

New York City



New York City

New York City

New York City

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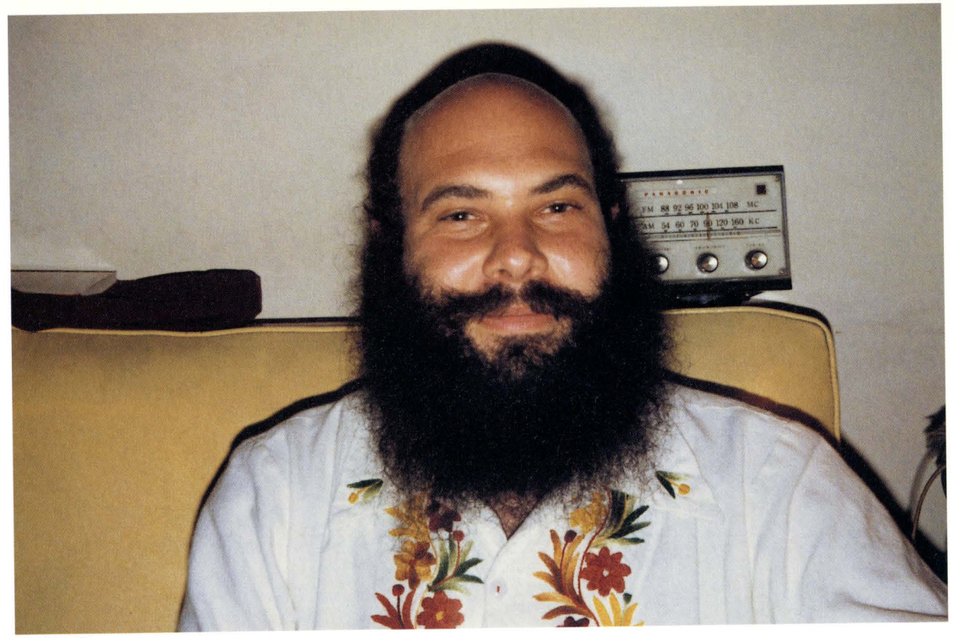

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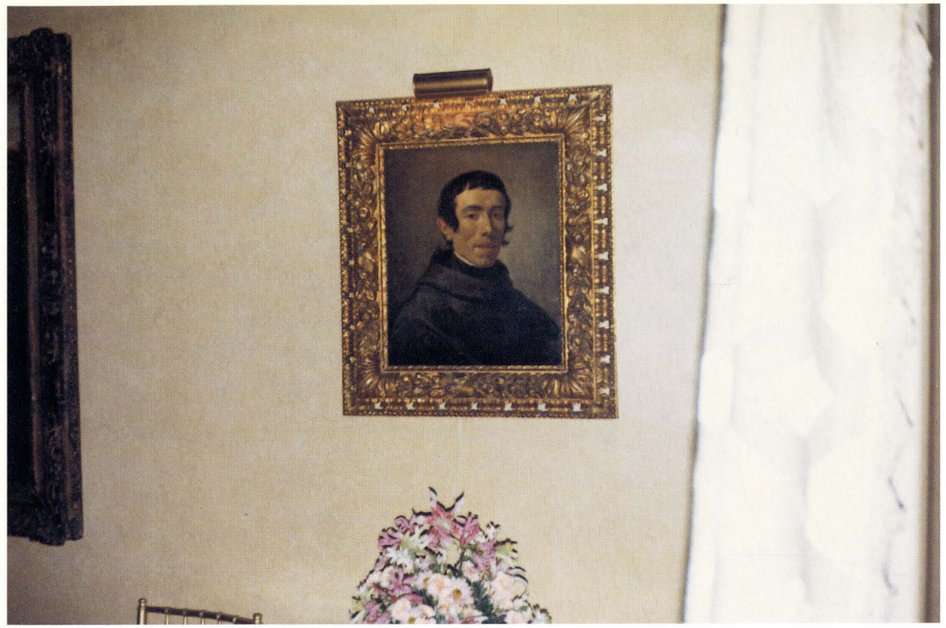

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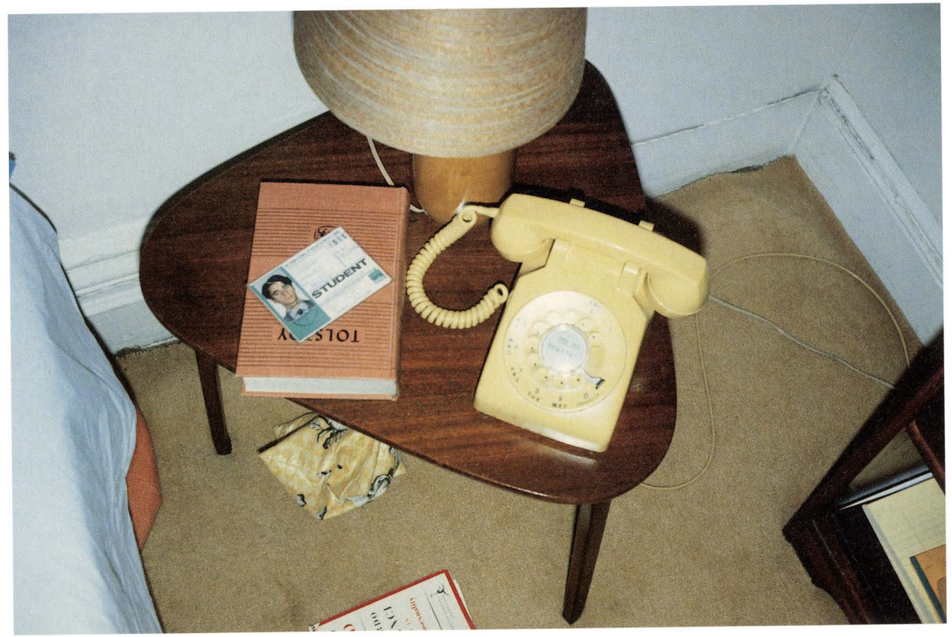

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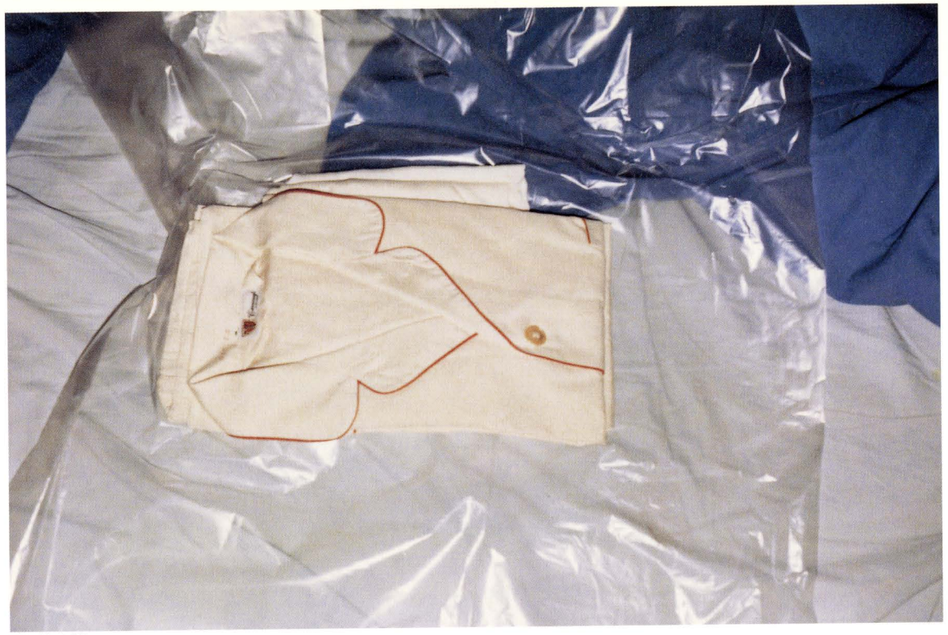

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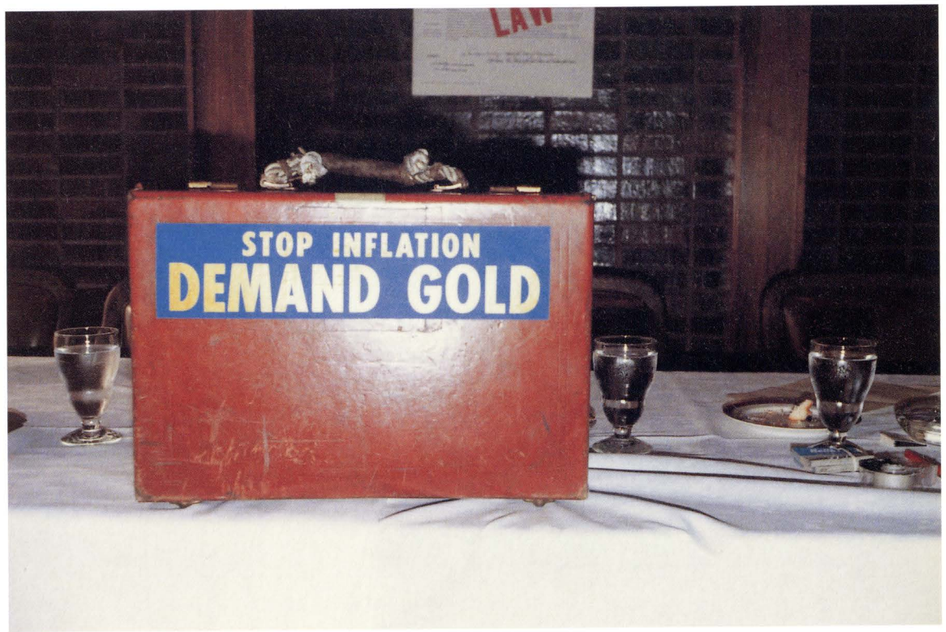

New York City

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US VIRGIN ISLANDS
NOVEMBER 1972

Flight to St John

Washington

Washington

Washington

Flight to New York City

Flight to New York City

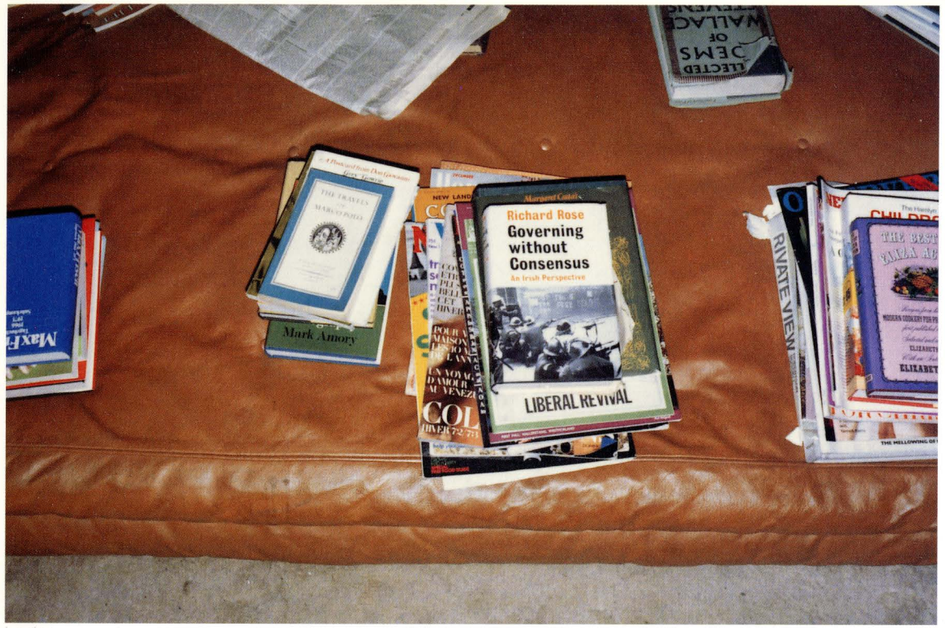
New York City

West Palm Beach

London

London

London



London

London

London

London

West Palm Beach

West Palm Beach

West Palm Beach

West Palm Beach

West Palm Beach

West Palm Beach

West Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Palm Beach

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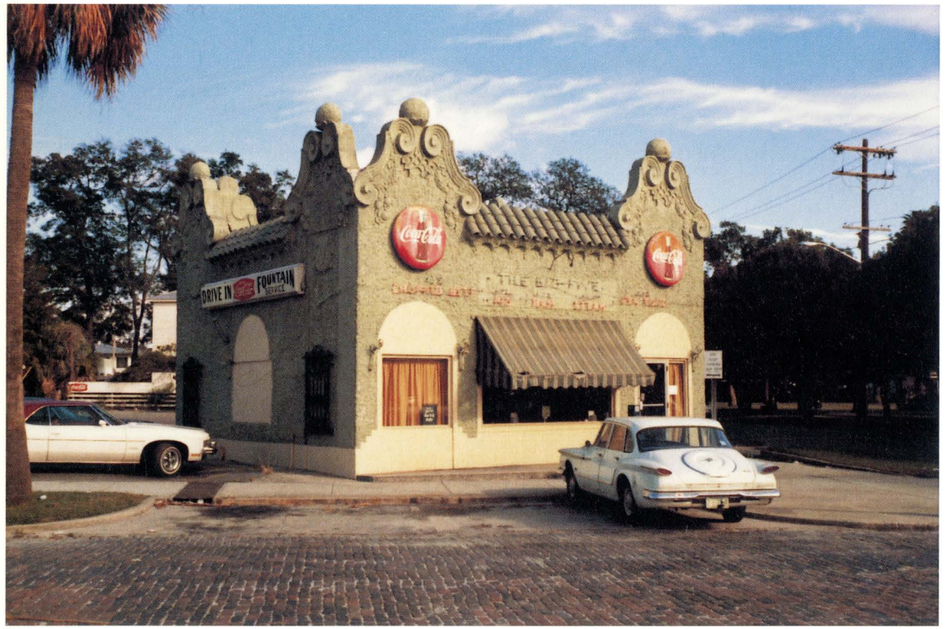
West Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Jacksonville



Jacksonville

Jacksonville

Jacksonville

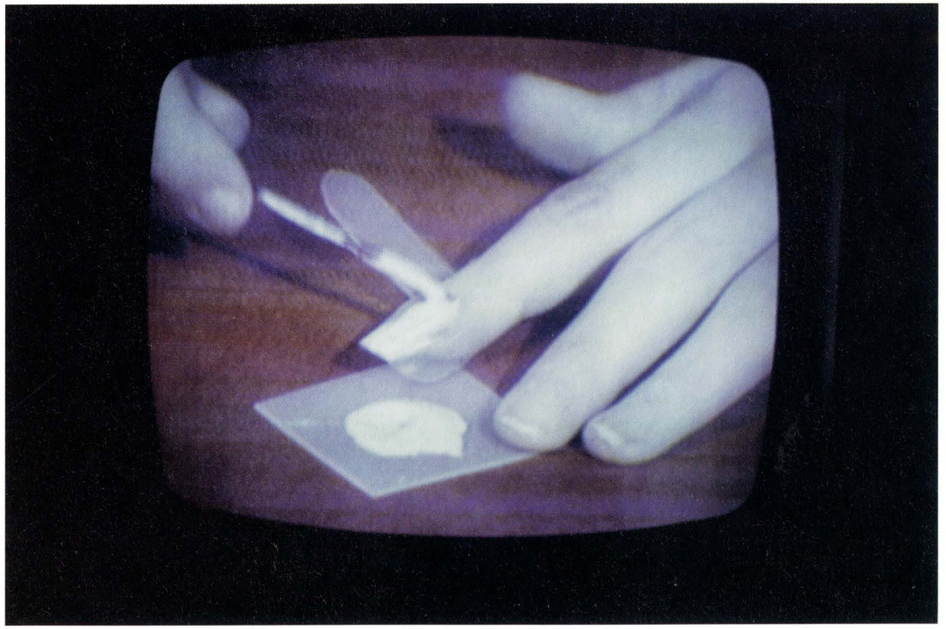
New Bern

Cape May

Cape May

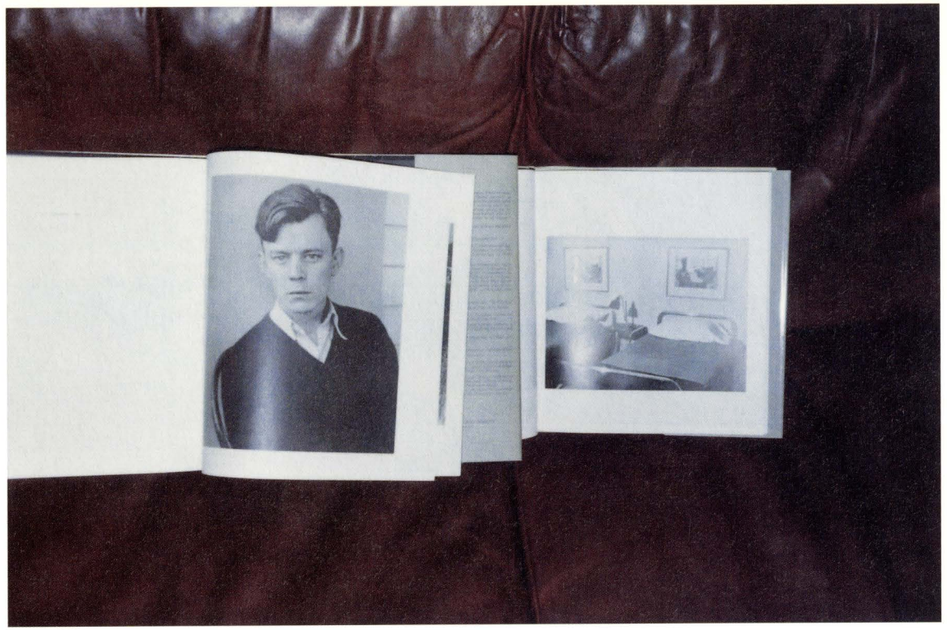
Cape May

NEW YORK
JANUARY 1973



New York City

New York City



New York City

New York City

West Palm Beach

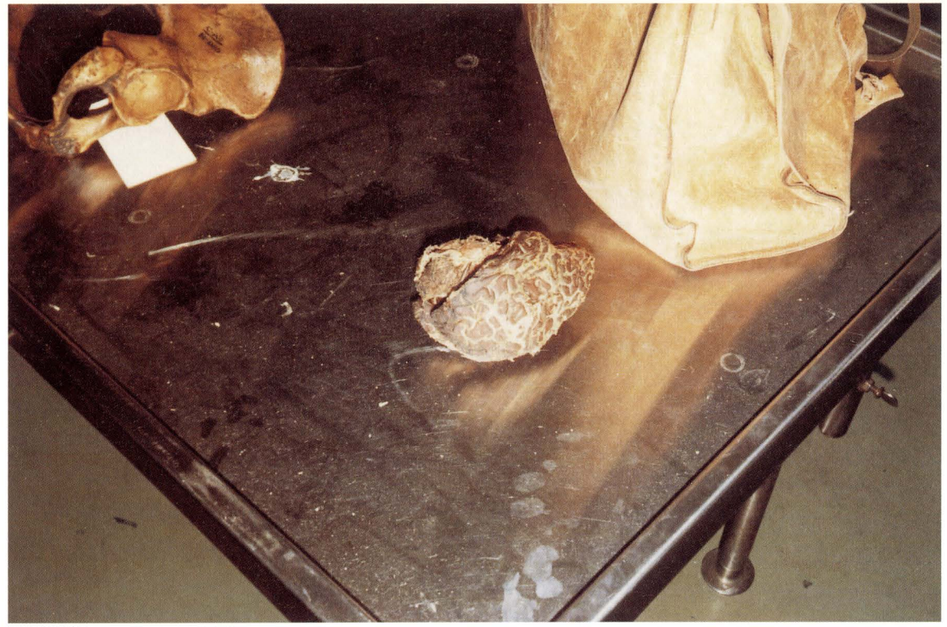
West Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Delray Beach

New York City

New York City



New York City

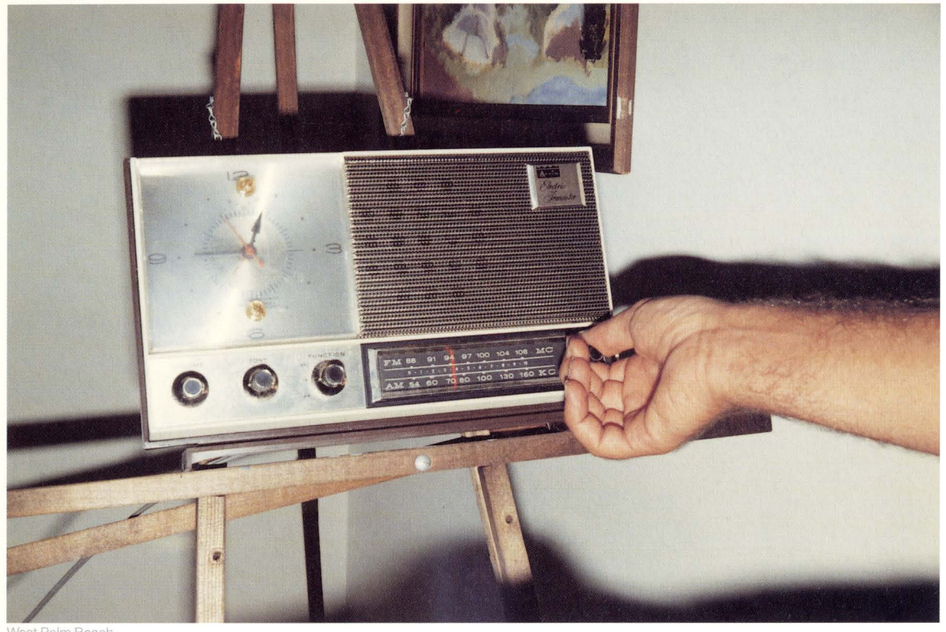
New York City

Sneden's Landing

New York City

FLORIDA
APRIL–MAY 1973

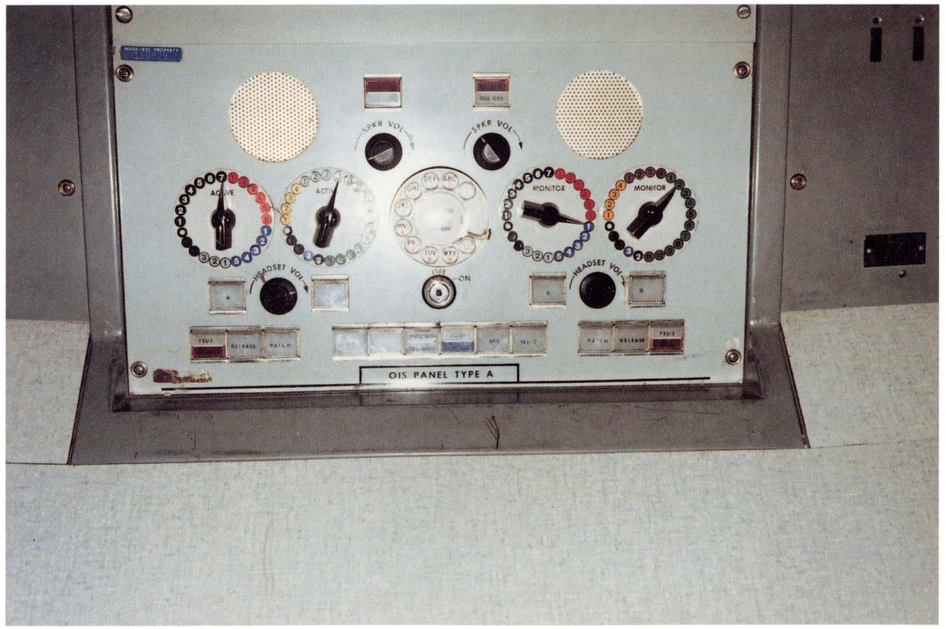
Palm Beach



West Palm Beach

Cape Kennedy

Cape Kennedy



Cape Kennedy

Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Palm Beach

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Amarillo

Memphis

INDEX OF PLACES

Aiken, SC 32
Alabama 36–8
Alanreed, TX 103
Albuquerque, NM 49, 83
Amarillo, TX 90–5, 97–102, 224–8
Arizona 72, 77–80

Baltimore, MD 23
Birmingham, MI 138–9

Canyon, TX 96
Cape Kennedy, FL 220–1
Cape May, NJ 207–8
Cerrillos, NM 52
Chicago, IL 124–5
Chimayo, NM 50–1
Clinton, OK 110–11
Clovis, NM 44–6
Colorado 64–71
Columbia, SC 30–1
Columbus, GA 35
Connecticut 15–16, 152

Dallas, TX 42
Dayton, OH 144–7
Delray Beach, FL 214
District of Columbia 140, 180–2
Durango, CO 66–71

England 185–9

Farmington, NM 56–63
Flight to Dayton, OH 143
Flight to New York City, NY 182
Flight to St John 179
Florida 184, 190–204, 212–14, 219–23
Fredericksburg, VA 24–5

Gallup, NM 81–2
Georgia 33–5
Grand Canyon, AZ 77
Granite, OK 105–9
Greenwich, CT 15–16

Holbrook, AZ 79–80

Illinois 122–5

Jacksonville, FL 204
Jacksonville, NC 205–6

Kanab, UT 73–5

Lake Powell, UT 76
London 185–9
Lubbock, TX 43

Macon, GA 33–4
Marshall, TX 41
Maryland 23
Memphis, TN 229
Meridian, MS 39–40
Mesa Verde, CO 64–5
Miami, OK 114–16
Michigan 136–9
Mineral Wells, TX 43
Mississippi 39–40
Missouri 117–21
Montgomery, AL 36–7

New Bern, NC 206
New Jersey 207–8
New Mexico 44–63, 81–9
N.M. 44 56
New York City, NY 13–14, 17–18, 22, 128–32, 134, 141–2, 153–78, 183, 209–11, 215–18
New York State 13–14, 17–22, 128–32, 134–5, 141–2, 148–51, 153–78, 183, 209–11, 215–18
Normal, IL 123
North Carolina 26–9, 205–6

Ohio 126–7, 143–7
Oklahoma 105–16
Oklahoma City, OK 112–13

Palm Beach, FL 195–9, 202–3, 213, 219, 222–3
Pennsylvania 133
Petersburg, NY 148–51
Philadelphia, PA 133
Pontiac, MI 136–7
Pueblo Bonito, NM 54

Queens, NY 19–22

Raleigh, NC 26–9
Richmond, VA 25
Rochester, MI 137–8
Rolla, MO 118

St Louis, MO 119–21
Sandusky, OH 126–7
Santa Fe, NM 47, 52–3, 55
Santa Rosa, NM 48
Selma, AL 38
Shamrock, TX 104
Sneden's Landing, NY 135, 218
South Carolina 30–2
Springfield, IL 122–3
Springfield, MO 117
Staten Island, NY 142

Tennessee 229
Texas 41–3, 90–104, 224–8
Toledo, OH 127
Tucumcari, NM 84–9

Utah 73–6
U.S. 89 72
US Virgin Islands 179

Virginia 24–5

Washington 140, 180–1
West Palm Beach, FL 184, 190–4, 200–1, 212–13, 220
Westport, CT 152
Winslow, AZ 78

To Ginger, with all of my love,
on our 25th anniversary.

I wish to express my gratitude to Lisa Spellman, Mari Spirito, Simon Lee, and Bill Charles for their continuing support of my work. I would also like to extend my thanks to Rodolphe Janssen, Monika Sprüth, Philomene Magers, and Kamel Mennour. I'm appreciative of the time and attention Bob Nickas devoted to the essay in this book. And at Phaidon, I'd like to thank Richard Schlagman, Eliza Williams and Amanda Renshaw. Without Amanda's insight and imagination this project would not have come to be.

Finally, I wish to remember Ziggy, who had a joyous heart.

Ziggy

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